

PORTFOLIO: COMMUNITY NEEDS AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Case study: Bucharest, Romania

Element 1: Local Community Needs Analysis

Element 2: Social Enterprise Proposal

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Element 1: Local Community Needs Analysis in Bucharest

Introduction

Bucharest is Romania's largest city and its main economic centre. It offers universities, employment and services, but these opportunities coexist with environmental pressures and unequal access to resources. This analysis identifies two community needs that can be addressed through local action: improving household waste separation and recycling, and strengthening access to affordable food and practical support for residents experiencing hardship. The analysis uses secondary research and community-development theory. Regional statistics do not describe every neighbourhood or household, so the findings should be treated as a starting point for local consultation rather than as a substitute for surveys with residents.

Need 1: Better waste separation, recycling and circular-economy participation

An important need in Bucharest is to make waste prevention and sorting easier and more consistent. The European Environment Agency (EEA, 2025) reports that Romania recycled about 12% of municipal waste in 2022, compared with an estimated EU-27 average of 49%; around 74% was landfilled. These are national figures, not a direct measurement of Bucharest alone, but they indicate a wider system challenge that affects the capital through household habits, collection systems and the market for recovered materials. A municipal document reviewing Bucharest's separate collection performance reported low rates in 2020–2022 and estimated separate collection of bio-waste at around 1% of household and similar waste during the period (Municipality of Bucharest, 2026). Although the period and reporting method should be kept in mind, this points to room for improvement in both infrastructure and public participation.

The need is not simply that residents should 'recycle more'. People need convenient, clearly labelled collection points, reliable collection, understandable information about what can be recycled, and feedback showing that sorted materials are actually recovered. Apartment blocks, where many residents share bins and waste rooms, can make correct separation difficult when facilities are missing, confusing or poorly maintained. Small businesses, markets and cafés also produce packaging and food waste that could be diverted from landfill if collection and reuse routes were practical.

Community-development theory helps explain why information campaigns alone may fail. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation argues that people should have meaningful

influence over decisions, rather than simply receive instructions. In practice, residents' associations, building administrators, sanitation providers and local authorities should jointly design collection arrangements and report results. The circular-economy approach also shifts attention from disposal to preventing waste, reusing products and recovering materials (European Commission, 2020). A neighbourhood project could therefore combine accessible sorting points, repair and reuse events, composting pilots and workshops for schools and apartment associations.

Need 2: More accessible support around affordable food and social inclusion

A second need is to make affordable, nutritious food and community support more accessible to people facing temporary or persistent financial difficulty. The evidence requires careful interpretation: Eurostat reported that the Bucureşti-Ilfov region had one of the EU's lowest at-risk-of-poverty rates in 2023, at 2.1% (Eurostat, 2024). This regional indicator is encouraging, but it is an average and does not mean that hardship is absent from particular households or neighbourhoods. Nationally, Romania's relative poverty rate was 19.0% in 2024, representing approximately 3.595 million people (National Institute of Statistics, reported by AGERPRES, 2025). Regional prosperity and national hardship can coexist, while the cost of housing, transport and food can place pressure on people with low or unstable incomes.

Groups who may need tailored support include low-income older adults, single-parent households, people in insecure work, students with limited resources and residents who are socially isolated. This list is a set of groups to investigate locally, not a claim that all members experience food insecurity. A responsible needs assessment would consult social workers, charities, community centres, schools, local markets and residents themselves. Short interviews, anonymous questionnaires and a neighbourhood food-access map could identify whether the main barriers are price, transport, limited cooking facilities, lack of information or stigma around asking for help.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) places basic physiological needs, including food, near the foundation of human wellbeing. While the model is simplified and does not explain every person's priorities, it illustrates why access to food can affect people's ability to participate in education, work and community life. Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1999) provides a broader perspective: wellbeing is not just income, but the real freedom to achieve valued ways of living. Support should therefore preserve dignity and choice, offering nutritious food through accessible channels rather than relying only on emergency parcels. Community food-sharing, discounted

surplus produce, cooking sessions and referrals to existing support services could address immediate needs while building social connections.

How the needs should be prioritised

The two needs are connected by resource efficiency. Food that is not sold or consumed becomes waste, while households can struggle to afford food at the same time. A local project could prevent edible food from being discarded and redirect it safely to residents who want it. However, food safety, refrigeration, traceability and recipient privacy must be built into the design. Waste sorting and food redistribution should not replace the responsibility of public authorities or existing charities; they should complement current services.

Before launching a project, a short feasibility study should establish a baseline: the number and type of participating households and businesses, the quantity of recyclable material collected, the volume of edible surplus safely redistributed, and residents' views on accessibility. Results should be disaggregated where appropriate without collecting unnecessary personal data. Participation should be voluntary and co-designed with residents. This reflects a strengths-based approach, which recognises local skills, relationships and existing organisations rather than portraying the community only through its problems.

Conclusion

Bucharest has opportunities to improve environmental performance and strengthen local resilience. Evidence on Romania's low municipal recycling rate and Bucharest's historical separate-collection performance supports action on waste prevention, sorting and reuse. Meanwhile, the low regional poverty indicator should not obscure the possibility of hardship among particular households; national poverty data and local consultation justify investigating access to affordable food without exaggerating the scale of the problem. A community-led circular initiative could connect these priorities, provided it is designed with residents, works alongside established services and measures outcomes transparently.

Element 2: Business Idea and Enterprise Model

Proposal: Bucharest Circular Community Hub

The proposed business is the Bucharest Circular Community Hub (BCCH), a small social enterprise that reduces avoidable waste while improving access to affordable food and practical sustainability services. It would begin in one neighbourhood and expand only after a pilot demonstrates demand, safe operations and financial viability. The hub would work with grocery shops, markets, cafés, apartment associations, schools, local charities and municipal services. Its central proposition is straightforward: help local businesses handle surplus and recyclable materials responsibly, while making useful resources more accessible to residents.

The service and value created

The hub would have three connected activities. First, participating food businesses would notify the hub about edible surplus near the end of the trading day. Trained staff or volunteers would collect eligible items according to agreed food-safety procedures, record quantities and dates, and transfer them promptly to partner charities or a community pantry. Where suitable, a low-cost community shop could sell selected surplus produce at reduced prices, while a defined share would be supplied through partner organisations to people referred for support. The model would never distribute food that fails safety checks, and it would follow applicable Romanian food-safety and donation requirements.

Second, the hub would offer waste-separation support to apartment blocks and small businesses: simple signage, brief training, collection-point audits and links to authorised recycling operators. Third, it would run repair, reuse and composting workshops, especially with schools and residents' associations. These activities are designed to turn environmental advice into practical, repeated behaviour. The hub would publish a simple monthly impact report, such as kilograms of edible food redistributed, kilograms of material sent to recycling partners, participating buildings and workshop attendance.

Value is created for several groups. Residents gain affordable options, practical skills and a welcoming community space. Food businesses may reduce disposal costs and improve their environmental credentials. Apartment associations receive practical help with sorting and resident communication. Charities gain a more predictable supply of suitable food, while the city benefits from waste prevention and stronger community participation. The hub would avoid framing

recipients as passive beneficiaries: residents could help shape services, volunteer, share skills and participate in governance.

Enterprise model: a social enterprise with mixed income

A social enterprise is the most appropriate model because the proposal combines a trading activity with an explicit social and environmental mission. The European Commission's Social Business Initiative describes social enterprises as organisations whose primary objective is to achieve social impact rather than generate profit for owners, using commercial activity to pursue that objective (European Commission, 2011). BCCH could be established under a suitable Romanian legal form after professional advice, with its social purpose, reinvestment policy and governance commitments written into its founding documents. The exact legal structure should be confirmed with a Romanian accountant or lawyer; the label 'social enterprise' alone does not automatically confer a particular legal status.

Income should be diversified to avoid dependence on a single grant. Potential revenue streams include modest service contracts with businesses for waste audits and staff training; paid sustainability workshops for schools and companies; sales of selected safe surplus produce at affordable prices; membership contributions from participating businesses; and time-limited grants or sponsorship for community access. Donations and public funding could subsidise free or reduced-cost services for people who need them. The hub should not charge people in hardship for access to emergency food support, and eligibility processes should be simple, confidential and respectful.

The business model can be assessed through the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). Key partners are food retailers, markets, recycling operators, charities, schools and local authorities. Key activities include collection, food-safety checks, redistribution, training and impact measurement. Key resources are a small accessible premises, refrigerated storage where required, transport, trained staff and trusted partnerships. Customer and beneficiary relationships depend on reliability, transparency and dignity. Main costs include staff, rent, utilities, transport, insurance, food-safe equipment, waste handling, training and monitoring. A pilot should test whether paid services and produce sales cover a realistic share of operating costs before the hub commits to expansion.

Theory, governance and operational risks

The triple bottom line framework encourages organisations to consider people, planet and economic viability together (Elkington, 1997). For BCCH, ‘people’ means accessible food and inclusive participation; ‘planet’ means preventing edible food waste and improving material recovery; and ‘prosperity’ means earning enough income to continue delivering the service. These goals can conflict. For example, charging higher prices may improve revenue but reduce affordability, while collecting more surplus food may increase transport costs or food-safety risk. Clear rules, a balanced scorecard and regular community feedback can help manage these trade-offs.

Stakeholder theory also suggests that long-term success depends on understanding the interests of all groups affected by the enterprise, not only paying customers (Freeman, 1984). A small advisory group could include residents, a charity partner, a food-business representative, a waste-management specialist and a staff member. It would review service quality, complaints, safeguarding, food-safety procedures and the allocation of any surplus. The enterprise should publish its basic finances and impact measures, and provide an accessible way for residents to make suggestions or raise concerns.

Risks include irregular food donations, contamination, rising transport costs, weak participation in recycling, overreliance on volunteers and competition with existing food-support organisations. Mitigations include written donor agreements, temperature and traceability logs, staff training, a limited geographic pilot, paid core roles, referral partnerships and clear boundaries about the service offered. The hub should not assume that every surplus item is suitable for redistribution, or that every resident wants to receive food assistance. Consent, dignity and choice are essential.

Implementation and evaluation

In the first three months, the founders would conduct interviews with residents and partners, map existing services, confirm legal and food-safety obligations, and recruit a small group of participating businesses. Months four to six would test the model in one neighbourhood with a limited number of collection points and one charity partner. At the end of the pilot, the team would compare results with its baseline and decide whether to continue, adapt or stop. Key indicators would include kilograms of safe food redistributed, kilograms of recyclables collected through partner arrangements, number of active partners, cost per unit handled, repeat participation, and anonymous feedback on accessibility and dignity. Targets should be set only after baseline data and partner capacity are known.

Conclusion

The Bucharest Circular Community Hub is a plausible social-enterprise response to two connected needs: better waste prevention and recycling, and more accessible routes to affordable food for residents who experience hardship. Its strength is the integration of environmental services with community benefit, supported by a mixed-income model and local partnerships. Its success is not guaranteed: it depends on a realistic pilot, robust food-safety practices, resident participation and transparent measurement. By reinvesting any surplus into its mission, the hub could create local value while building a more circular and inclusive neighbourhood.

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